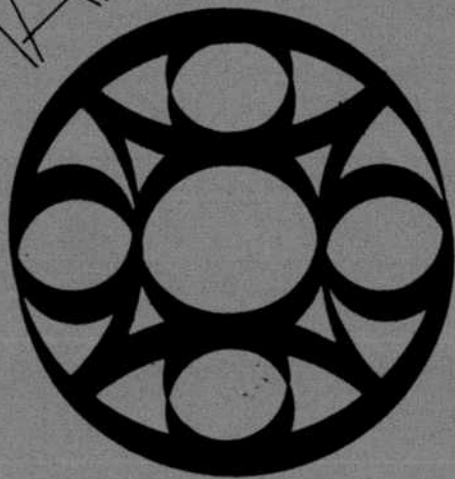


# CHARLES HOUSE

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION  
MAY, 1972



**JAMES CHARNLEY HOUSE**  
1365 North Astor Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60611

**Date of Construction: 1891-92**

**Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright (in the office of Adler and Sullivan)**

**Landmark Site:** West 50 feet of Lot 35 in John Jacob Astor's addition to Chicago, Section 3, Township 39 North, Range 14.

Frank Lloyd Wright came to Chicago in 1887. He was 20 years old that year and already had worked for two years as a junior apprentice to a builder in Madison, Wisconsin. One residence in Madison had made a strong impression on him, says Grant Carpenter Manson, biographer of his early years. The "composition of simple cubes, with plenty of bare brick wall" conceivably was one source of inspiration for the Charnley House, says Manson.

In Chicago, after working briefly in two architectural firms, Wright was taken on as apprentice by the firm of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, who were working on the plans for their great Auditorium Building, Hotel, and Theatre. Soon Wright became Sullivan's chief draftsman, and when Sullivan in 1889 went to Biloxi, Mississippi, for six weeks to recuperate from the strain of finishing the Auditorium Theatre in time for the grand opening, he did his recuperating in the country house Wright had designed for him.

Next door to Sullivan's southern retreat was the cottage of his good friends, the James Charnleys, also designed by Wright. "Both were experiments that seem tame enough now," Wright wrote in *Genius and the Mobocracy*. "Later I designed the Charnley townhouse on Astor Street."

In his *Autobiography*, Wright tells us that Adler and Sullivan "refused to build residences during all the time I was with them. The few that were imperative owing to social obligations to important clients fell to my lot out of office hours. They would, of course, 'check up' on them in good time." Sullivan's own home on Lake Park Avenue (now demolished) was one of these, Wright says. "The city house for the Charnleys. . .like the others, I did at home evenings and Sundays. . ."

Wright by this time was married and had built a home in Oak Park with money loaned to him by Sullivan, so he was glad to get extra work. The drawings for the Charnley House "were all traced and printed in the Adler and Sullivan offices, but by preparing them for this purpose at home I helped pay my pressing building debts," Wright says.

### **The Charnley House**

The Charnley House was an important milestone--for Frank Lloyd Wright, for architecture.

"What brings architectural students to this dwelling is the fact that it represents one of the first attempts at 'modernism' in architecture--an attempt all the more daring because the house was built in the era of eclectic ostentation," wrote John Drury in *Old Chicago Houses*. Or as Michaela Williams said in an article for the *Chicago Daily News*: "When the Potter Palmers, and McCormicks, and Bordens, and Cranes, and Lincolns were building their monumentally gaudy homes on Lake Shore Drive, Charnley's house must have been quite austere."

In it, said Wright, "I first sensed the decorative value of the plain surface--that is to say--of the flat plane as such. This may be seen in the placing of the single openings in the center of the plain wall-masses."

Despite its three stories, the Charnley House hugs the ground, and its emphasis on the horizontal foreshadowed Wright's Prairie House style and influenced the later development of the so-called ranch house throughout the country. Innovative, too, in 1891-92, were the clean-cut rectangles of the Charnley House. As Hugh Morrison says in his *Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture*, "The severely cubic volumes suggest the beginnings of Wright's later horizontalism."

"Nothing exactly like this had been seen before," says Finis Farr in his biography of Wright, "it was serene, self-contained, and more than a little cold. In comparison with this chilly reticence, houses in traditional style were likely to seem overstated unless they were very good indeed."

Also commenting on the effect of Wright's embryo horizontalism, Manson says, "The overriding effect of the house is that of quiet repose, accentuated by contrast with the hardworking pomposity of the 'Period' buildings on every side."

Contributing to what Manson calls "a restful horizontality" are the smooth-faced random ashlar limestone base with its sharply chiseled thin blocks; the long courses of wafer-thin bricks above the base; the limestone belt course between the second and third floors; the strong narrow bands of molded copper on the cornice, and the low chimneys.

"As much as it can. . .the building comes down to earth," writes Manson, and continues:

Indeed, the Charnley house is both an authoritative invention. . .and a prophecy. Its inventive element is that tendency. . . to look upon architecture as an exercise in solid geometry. . .The prophetic element. . .is its desire to humanize architecture, to break down its pretentiousness by some means as yet not grasped. What in essence is so impressive about the Charnley house is that it was a first major experiment.

Albert Bush-Brown, in his book on Sullivan, also comments on the restful quality of the house, wherein "each feature asserts the level line. Its severe rectangles avoid all whimsy and complexity in favor of repose."

However, says Manson, "The Charnley house, for all its innovation and portent, has one glaring fault: it is closed, hard, impermeable. The idea of interpenetration of atmosphere and structure had not yet crystalized in Wright's imagination."

"The Charnley House was Wright's first completely disciplined and unromantic statement," writes Peter Blake in *The Master Builder*. According to Blake:

. . .its most important characteristic is its extreme 'modernity'--a kind of modernity which was not to be emulated by the pioneer European architects until twenty or thirty years later. For the Charnley House was an entirely smooth, geometric block, three stories high, rendered in precise brickwork (Wright used a flat, elongated brick known as 'Roman brick'), and composed in an absolutely classical, symmetrical way. The windows were unadorned rectangles cut out of the masonry wall, and the roof appeared to be a thin, flat slab, projecting out beyond the face of the building.

Blake does find, however, "certain romantic, art nouveau touches Wright had obviously acquired from Sullivan", such as the projecting balcony with a low wall ornamented in a typically Sullivanesque manner and the continuous frieze embellishing the edge of the flat, projecting roof that was reminiscent of Sullivan's decorative treatment of the roof fascia of the Wainwright Building in St. Louis. At the same time, Blake considered that "The decorative friezes on the Charnley House are among the best Wright ever achieved."

Morrison, too, finds Sullivanesque features in the balcony and cornices:

...but although Wright had completely mastered Sullivan's ornament, he tended when left free to organize it in a tighter geometric fashion, eliminating much of the free-flowing efflorescence of Sullivan's leaf ornament and reducing it to a flatter plane; the difference between the detail of this balcony and Sullivan's own work is striking.

In its simplicity, the Charnley House is certainly related to the skyscrapers of the Chicago School, especially John Root's Monadnock Building of 1891. It is also akin to Sullivan's 1890-91 Wainwright Building in St. Louis, as various writers have pointed out.

In shape, the Charnley House is almost rectangular, measuring approximately 77' in width and 26' in depth, its south wall angling out at approximately 90° to follow the south lot line. Originally, the 7 foot limestone base of the west and north walls extended beyond the south wall to form a garden wall, but in 1927 a 10-foot addition to the south end of the house was superimposed over this. Although the addition disturbs the symmetry of the facade, it is not offensive. Perfectly matching brick was used, and since it was also possible to match not only the limestone belt course but also the copper roof fascia, the addition is actually inconspicuous.

The limestone of the base extends upward to frame the front entrance (three steps above the sidewalk) and its flanking pairs of leaded casement windows. Basement windows are set deeply into the limestone base and are covered with metal grills. With the exception of the windows flanking the entrance, upper-floor windows are double-hung.

The long balcony above the entrance apparently was originally of stained wood. It is now painted brown, and the thickness of what must be many coats of paint detracts from the beauty of what is presumed to be Wright's geometric adaptation of carved Sullivanesque ornamentation on both the low balcony wall and the entablature that rests on a colonnade of eight wooden pillars. The entablature is topped by a narrow cornice with decorative copper band, similar to that on the roof edge but with different ornamentation. The balcony is supported by seven wooden cantilevers with ends decorated to match the balcony wall. Originally open, the balcony is now enclosed.

The interior of the house is as simple as the exterior. Each of the three main stories of the house originally had just two rooms, separated by the central stair hall. A large skylight sends daylight down into the stairwell.

The entrance leads to a large foyer. On either side of the doorway, behind the leaded-glass windows, is an alcove with a bench. Large arches frame these alcoves, and other large arches frame the entrances to the living room at the north end, the dining room at the south, and the stairway on the east. An arched guest closet on the east wall repeats the arch of the stairwell entrance. Off the dining room is a small butler's pantry. A circular servants' stairway from the basement to the third floor is also lighted by a skylight.

In the original plan, the second and third floors each had two bedrooms with private bathrooms and large closets. The second-floor balcony could be entered through double doors from the central stairwell or from the master bedroom to the south.

On the first floor, the south addition provides a small porch on the west (which used to be screened-in) and a large kitchen on the east. On the second floor, the addition provides a small porch off the master bedroom and another large bedroom on the east. On the third floor, the addition provides servants' quarters. The south end of the basement housed the original kitchen, which was connected with the first-floor butler's pantry by a dumb waiter. At the north end was the laundry room.

All the main rooms in the house have fireplaces, and those on the first floor are of marble with elaborately carved wooden mantels in typical Sullivanesque style. The large bookcases in the living room have leaded-glass doors, also reminiscent of Sullivan. The wooden molding with beaded trim found throughout the house is especially fine.

Of the interior, Manson writes:

The quantity of exuberant Sullivanesque ornament inside the house comes as a surprise, spilling over door-panels, mantelpieces, bookcases and newel-posts. Otherwise, the rooms plainly herald Wright's later treatment of interiors. The three major spaces of the main floor open into each other with a minimum of restriction, and the staircase in its cage of thin oaken spindles is broad and of easy gradient, yet so disposed as to enrich the space by an abstract play of vertical and horizontal planes--an element of planning which, throughout the '90s, Wright was to handle with increasing delight and virtuosity. There is, however, no other sign...of that personal decorative vocabulary of geometric forms which Wright was to bring forth within the year. . .

Blake finds that:

Many of his later details are first suggested in these interiors, particularly the use of strong, linear, horizontal bands that create distance levels within the rooms and along walls. Except for a profusion of ornamentation in scattered areas, the Charnley House interiors were as simple as anything done by the Austrian pioneer, Adolf Loos and others twenty years later.

Then, two years before the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 had foisted a return to Classical architecture upon a public already surfeited with eclectic ostentation expressed in medieval turrets, mansard roofs, and English half-timbered facades, Wright had, Manson says:

...stated his belief in a new simplicity of plan and structure. . .What Wright had arrived at spontaneously in this epochal building was a bold and prepossessing statement of faith in his personal architecture of geometry, and of disbelief in the divine-rightness of tradition.

According to Manson:

There was no duplicate of the Charnley house anywhere in the world in 1891. It was a spontaneous performance, the result of a radical, independent architectural vision, an unfettered mind which, as Hitchcock (the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock) said, had nothing "to unlearn."

Today, the Charnley House is surrounded by high-rise apartments, as well as the remaining mansions of its own day. Designated as a landmark by the Commission on Chicago Architectural Landmarks in 1962, as one of the 29 Chicago buildings photographed and recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1964, and as a National Historic Landmark, the Charnley House stands unique, as the first stepping-stone in Frank Lloyd Wright's rapid climb to his place as leader of an architectural revolution that occurred in Chicago between 1890 and 1913 and ushered in the Prairie School. This new architecture embodied a new conception of space that was, according to Leonard K. Eaton, "so far in advance of its time that in certain respects contemporary architects are still (1969) trying to catch up with it."

Important intermediate steps were the Winslow House (1893) in River Forest and Heurtley House (1902) in Oak Park. Both were clearly ancestors of the Prairie House, which Wright finally realized in the Coonley House of Riverside (1908) and the Robie House of Chicago (1908-09).

## Charnley House Owners

What of the owners and occupants of the famous Charnley House? What manner of people were they?

**James Charnley**, friend of Louis Sullivan, was the son of William S. Charnley, a Philadelphia and New Haven, Connecticut, banker. Born in 1844 and a graduate of Yale, young Charnley came to Chicago in 1866 and soon was in the lumber business as a partner in the firm of Bradner, Charnley and Company. The business expanded and went through various organizations and changes of name and eventually included mills in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Mississippi.

Although Charnley was apparently one of the best-known lumbermen in the Midwest and became a very wealthy man, his name is strangely absent from most of the local histories and biographical volumes of the day.

He was married in 1871 to Helen M. Douglas, daughter of John D. Douglas, who in 1881, was not only president of the Illinois Central Railroad but the "& Company" of James Charnley & Company. The Charnleys, who had one son, were prominent members of the Fourth Presbyterian Church and lived on Lake Shore Drive for many years before buying property in 1890 at the corner of Schiller and the new street named Astor, where the house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for them was to be built.

It is interesting to note that the new street was so named because it lay within John Jacob Astor's Addition to Chicago. For the sake of the record, it should be stated that the Charnley's bought their lots on February 12, 1890, from Louise S. Long and her husband.

Charnley died in 1905 in Camden, South Carolina, where he had been living for some time. He was president of the Garden Wire and Spring Works at the time.

**Redmond D. Stephens**, a lawyer, bought the house on November 3, 1911. Born in Marion, Iowa, in 1874, he was a Harvard graduate and received his law degree from Northwestern University in 1899. He became a member of the law firm of Scott, Bancroft & Stephens and at one time was president of the Chicago & Oak Park Elevated Railway Company.

Married to the former Marion B. Ream of Chicago, daughter of the railroad magnate and philanthropist Norman B. Ream, he belonged to the "best" clubs, served as president of the Harvard Club of Chicago in 1913-14, and held directorships in the United States Gypsum Company, Union Special Machine Company, and Belden Manufacturing Company.

**James B. Waller**, a prominent real estate man, bought the house from Stephens on August 18, 1918, and members of the Waller family lived in the house until 1969.

Born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1856, James B. Waller was the son of James B. and Lucy Alexander Waller, who came to Chicago in 1860.

The father was a lawyer of some note in Kentucky, where he was a fellow practitioner and friend of Henry Clay. His wife, Lucy, was the daughter of a secretary of Benjamin Franklin. Attorney Waller was about 43 when he gave up his practice to come to Chicago. His brothers William, Edward, and Henry came to Chicago about the same time. Settling on farmland north of Chicago, the four brothers began the buying and selling of land that soon was to establish them solidly in the real estate business. The Waller tract was the inspiration for Eugene Field's "The Ballad of Waller Lot."

It is said that at one time the Wallers owned about half of the City of Lakeview, which, when it was annexed to Chicago in 1889, stretched from Fullerton on the south to Devon on the north and from Lake Michigan on the east to Western Avenue on the west (with the exception of a corner of Lincoln Park north of Fullerton and a triangular piece north of Fullerton between the North Branch of the Chicago River and Western).

At any rate, James B., the former Kentucky lawyer, founded the suburb of Buena Park on land he owned between Graceland Avenue (now Irving Park) on the south and Montrose on the north, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad tracks on the west and Lake Michigan on the east.

It was in this wooded section that he and his family lived in a grand, light-brick, Kentucky-style mansion with a cupola, built soon after their arrival. Called Buena House, it stood at what is now the intersection of Broadway and Buena Avenue. Three of the Wallers' eight or nine children eventually built homes in the same area, which became known for its beautiful homes.

Mrs. Waller was known as Madame Waller, and it is said that her home was noted for its Southern hospitality and great parties. She died at Buena House in 1902, a widow 79 years old (as of this writing, her husband's date of death is not known).

Because the Wallers, like many other large families in the 19th century, named their children not only for fathers and grandfathers but also for brothers and uncles, it is difficult to pin down the relationship between the various Jameses, Edwards, Williams, and Henrys.

However, it was **James B. Waller, Jr.**, born to the Kentucky lawyer in 1856, who bought the Charnley House in 1918. He was in the fire insurance business for some 15 years before going into real estate. He became a wealthy man who belonged to Chicago's elite clubs and lived on East Superior Street before moving to the Charnley House.

His wife was the former Elizabeth Wallace of Connecticut. In contrast to his father, who had eight or nine children, he had only two, James B. III and Ellen, who became Mrs. John Borden and later Mrs. John Alden Carpenter, mother-in-law of Governor Adlai Stevenson. He died in 1920.

In the insurance business with James B. Waller Jr. was his brother, Robert A. Waller, who in 1897 became Mayor Carter H. Harrison's first appointee as city comptroller (the Waller and Harrison families had been friends in Kentucky). A prominent man who held many important positions, including that of second vice president of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, he died in office in 1899. Waller High School was named for him.

**James B. Waller, III**, who inherited the Charnley House in 1920, was born in Chicago in 1888. He attended both public and private schools in the city, went East to prep school, was graduated from Princeton University in 1910 and earned a law degree from Harvard in 1913. He practiced law for a while in the firm of Winston, Strawn & Shaw and joined his father's real estate firm in 1914. Later he became chairman of the board of Waller & Beckwith Realty Company. He served in the Navy in World War I and was married for the first time in 1925 to Sarah Given, with whom he had two children--another James B. and another Robert A.!

Never interested in real estate, he left the business in the hands of James Beckwith and pursued social service and political activities.

In 1927 he organized the 43rd Ward Neighborhood Association, out of which grew the Waller Cooperative Bureau, a free welfare, employment, and relief agency which he financed largely out of his own pocket, mortgaging much of his property to do so.

Through this agency, he helped obtain jobs, food, and clothing for the unemployed; maintained a referral service to camps, hospitals, and social agencies, and even went to the courts and jail to help out the destitute. With him in this work was his second wife, Nettie, the former Mrs. Harry Griffith, whom he married in 1935.

In 1928 he also started a community newspaper, the *Northtown Economist*, on which he lost some \$50,000.

He served two terms as alderman, 1931-33 and 1943-45, and was Republican committeeman of the 43rd Ward from 1934 to 1948. A staunch opponent of the Kelly-Nash Machine and Ald. Mathias (Paddy) Bauler, he was an aggressive, reform-type of alderman. When he died early on September 14, 1949, at the age of 61, his obituary on page 1 of the *Chicago Tribune* of that same day described him as a "hard-hitting, good government minded Republican leader," particularly known for his battles with Bauler and for his "lone handed objections on the city council floor to policies of the Democratic administration of former Mayor Edward J. Kelly."

Upon the death of her husband, Mrs. Waller inherited a one-third share of his extensive properties. This included not only the Charnley House but also the once-elegant six-story apartment house immediately to the east on Schiller Street and the three-story house to the east of that. Still active in civic and political affairs, she continued to live in the Charnley House until 1969, not wanting to see it bought by someone who would tear it down and put up another high rise, as was happening to many of the old Gold Coast mansions. Finally, however, it became impossible for her to keep up the big house, and the three pieces of property were sold to Hawley L. Smith, Jr., with the understanding that the Smiths would occupy the Charnley House. Instead, the house has been rented, which leaves its fate in question.

So goes the story of an early Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece and the people who lived in it. Since the Waller family held the longest occupancy, it seems fitting to close with an incident involving a Waller and Wright under circumstances that revealed much about Wright's character.

Edward Carson Waller, an uncle of James B. Waller III, was a wealthy real estate man who specialized in downtown property and also maintained a number of other financial interests. William LeBaron Jenney's Home Insurance Company Building, considered the first true skyscraper, was built by Waller's Central Safety Deposit Company. For the same company, Waller promoted The Rookery, designed by Burnham and Root. According to Leonard K. Eaton:

Along with Owen Aldis, who put up the Monadnock, Waller can be classed as one of the great creative patrons of the first Chicago School. In addition to real estate interests, he was also president of the North American Accident Insurance Company. If any of Wright's clients was close to the city's business elite, it was Edward Waller.

The Edward C. Wallers lived in River Forest, across the street from the house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Winslows. So taken with the unusual architecture were they that Waller helped Wright get numerous commissions and the young architect became a close family friend.

In 1894, Waller arranged at his home a meeting between Wright and the important Daniel H. Burnham. At this meeting, recounted by Wright in his *Autobiography*, Burnham offered to send Wright to Paris and Rome for six years of study, all expenses paid, including those of his wife and children, and to take him into his firm when he came back. Realizing that this would mean spending six years studying traditional architecture and then going into a firm that wanted to see all American buildings copies of Greek and Roman temples, Wright said: "No...I can't run away."

Asked to explain what he meant by 'run away', he said:

Well, you see 'run away' from what I see as mine--I mean what I see as ours--in our country, to what can't belong to me, no I mean us, just because it means success. You see--I can't go, even if I wanted to go because I should never care for myself, after that.



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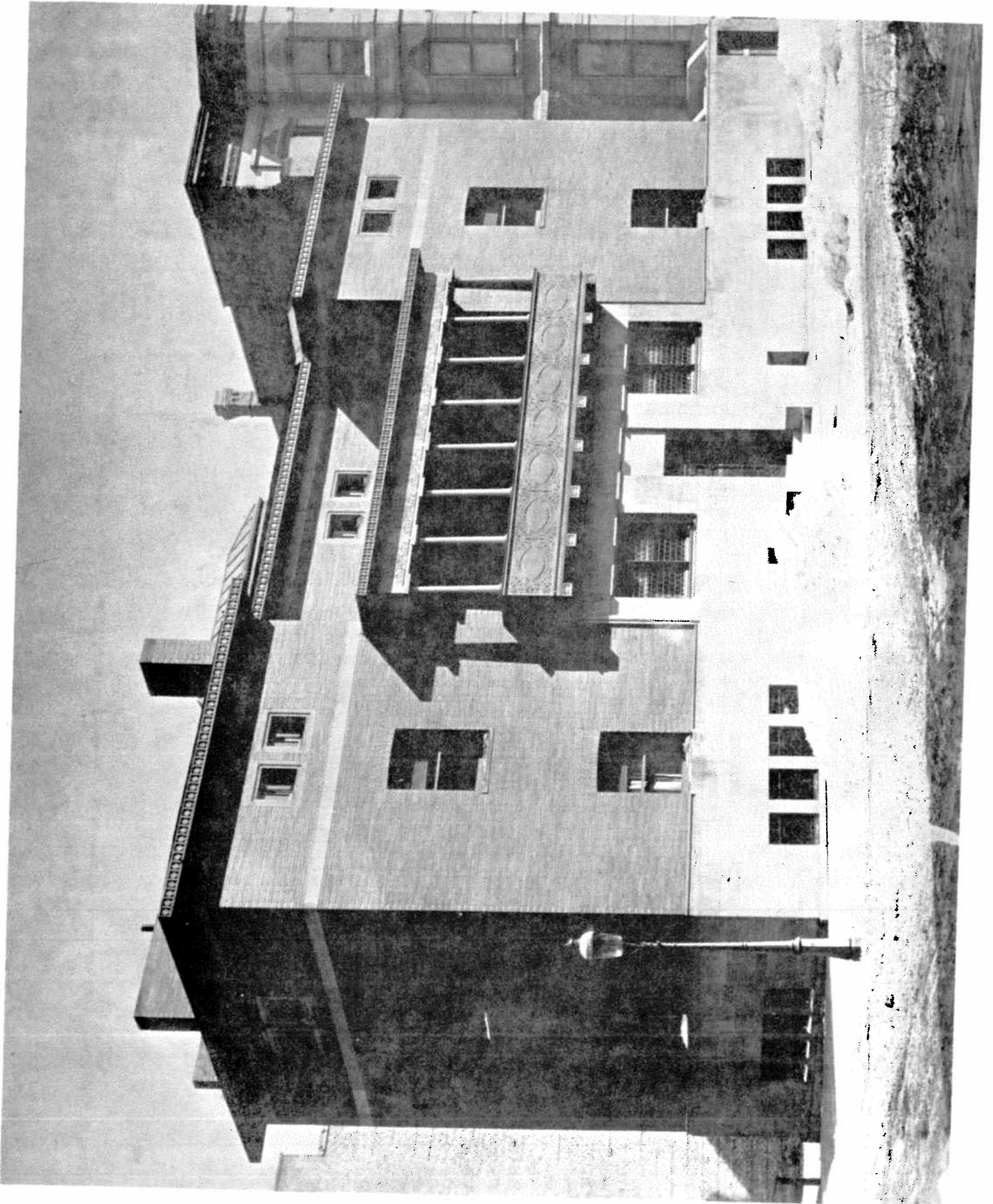
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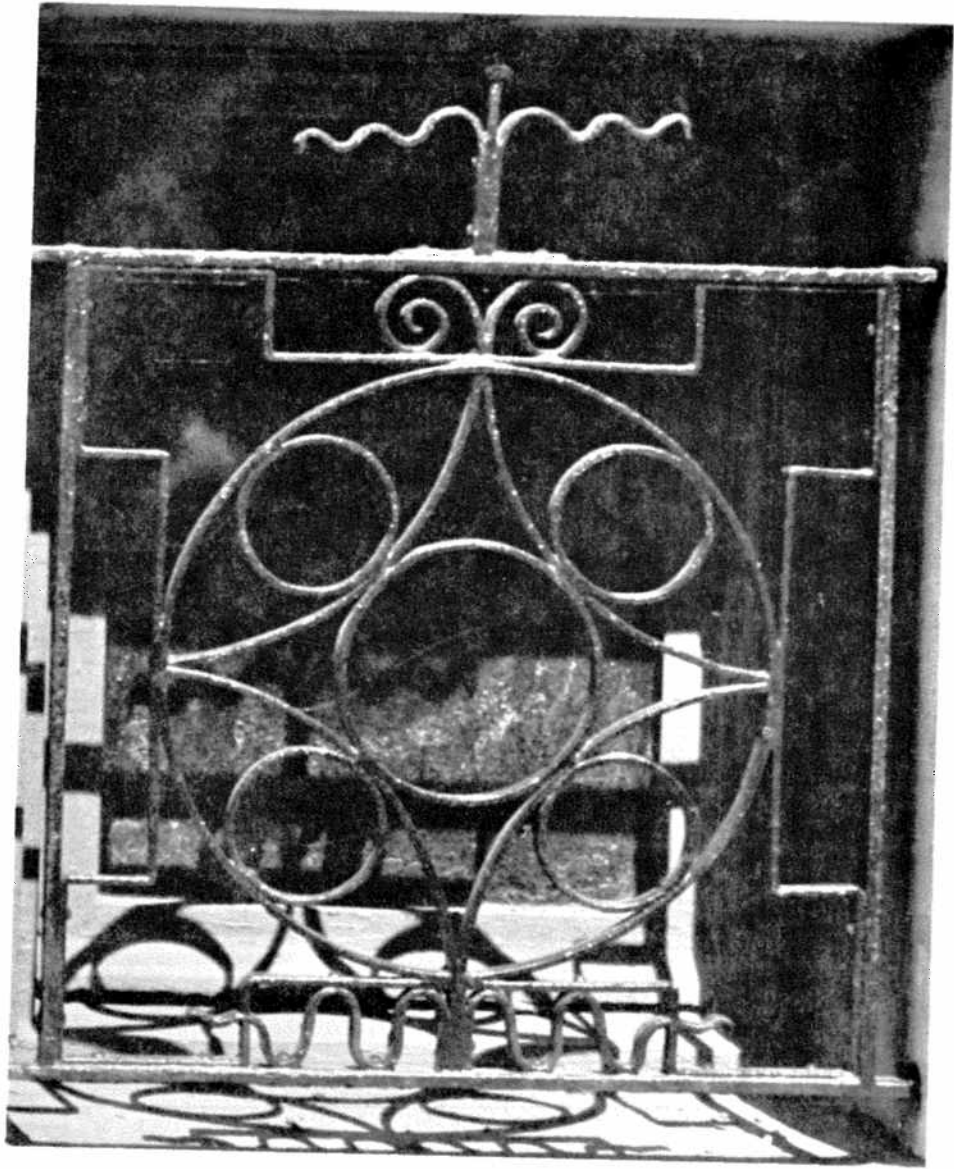
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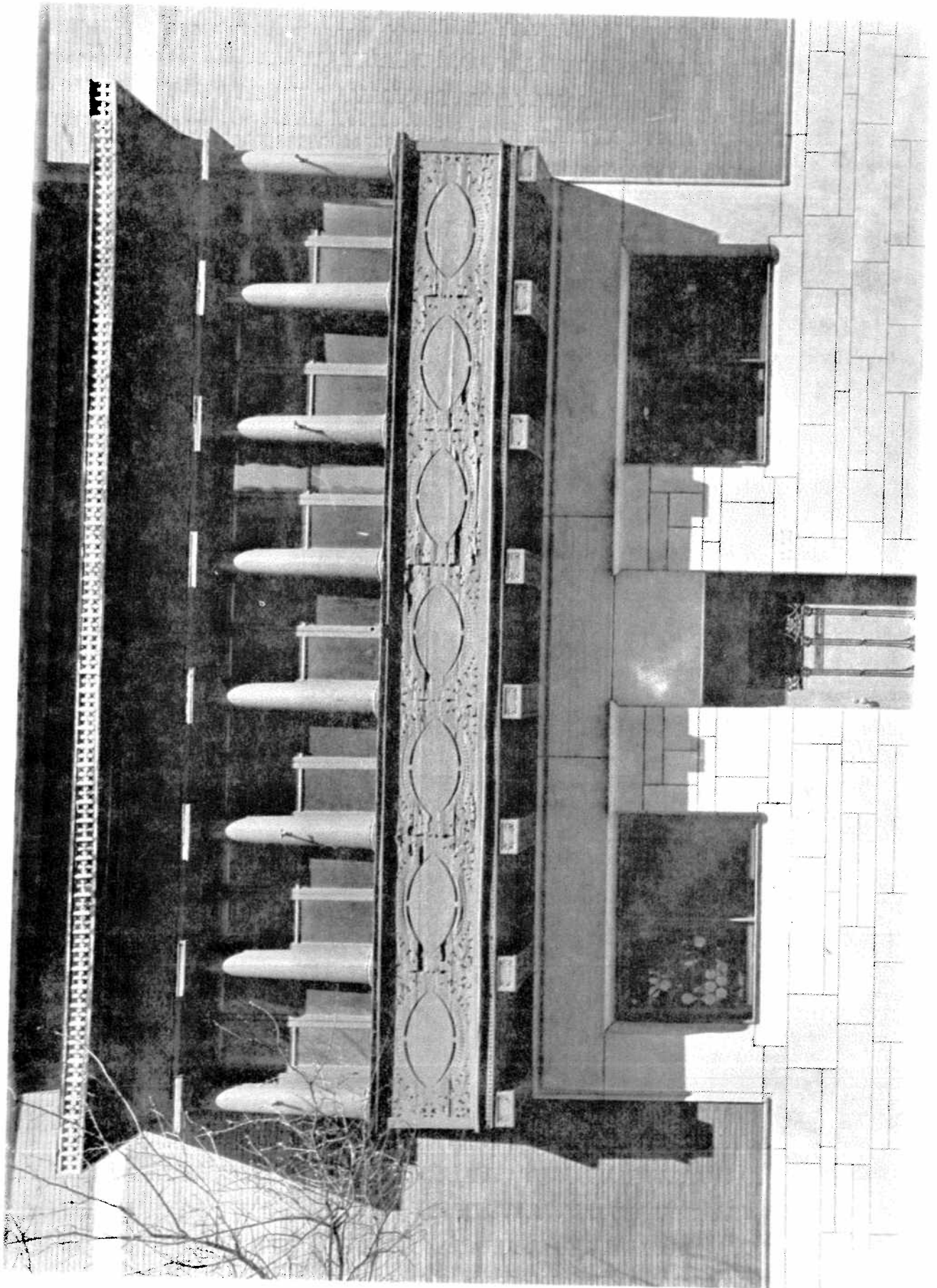
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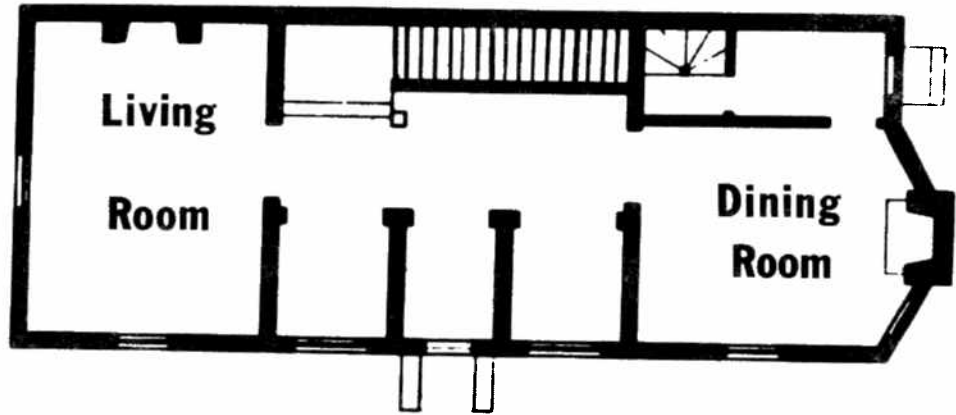
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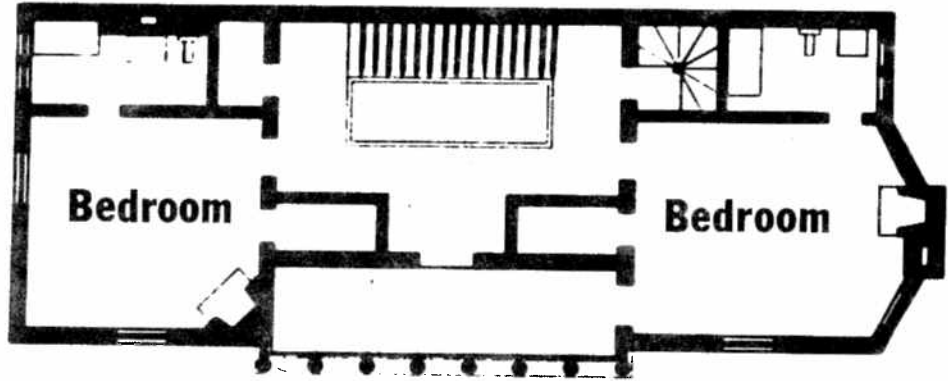




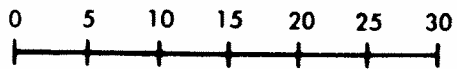
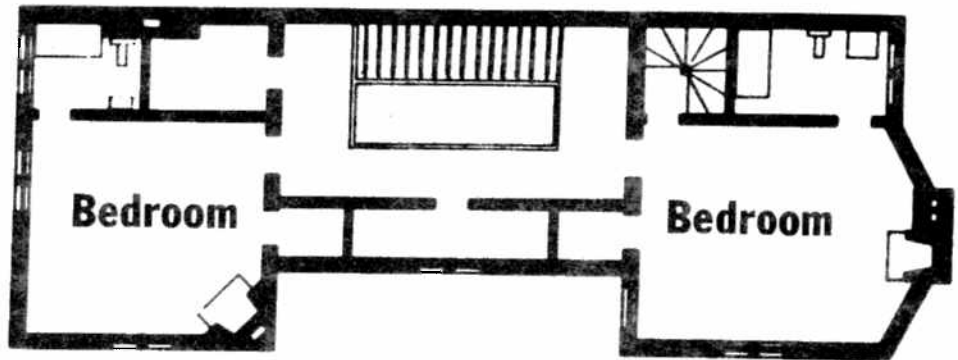
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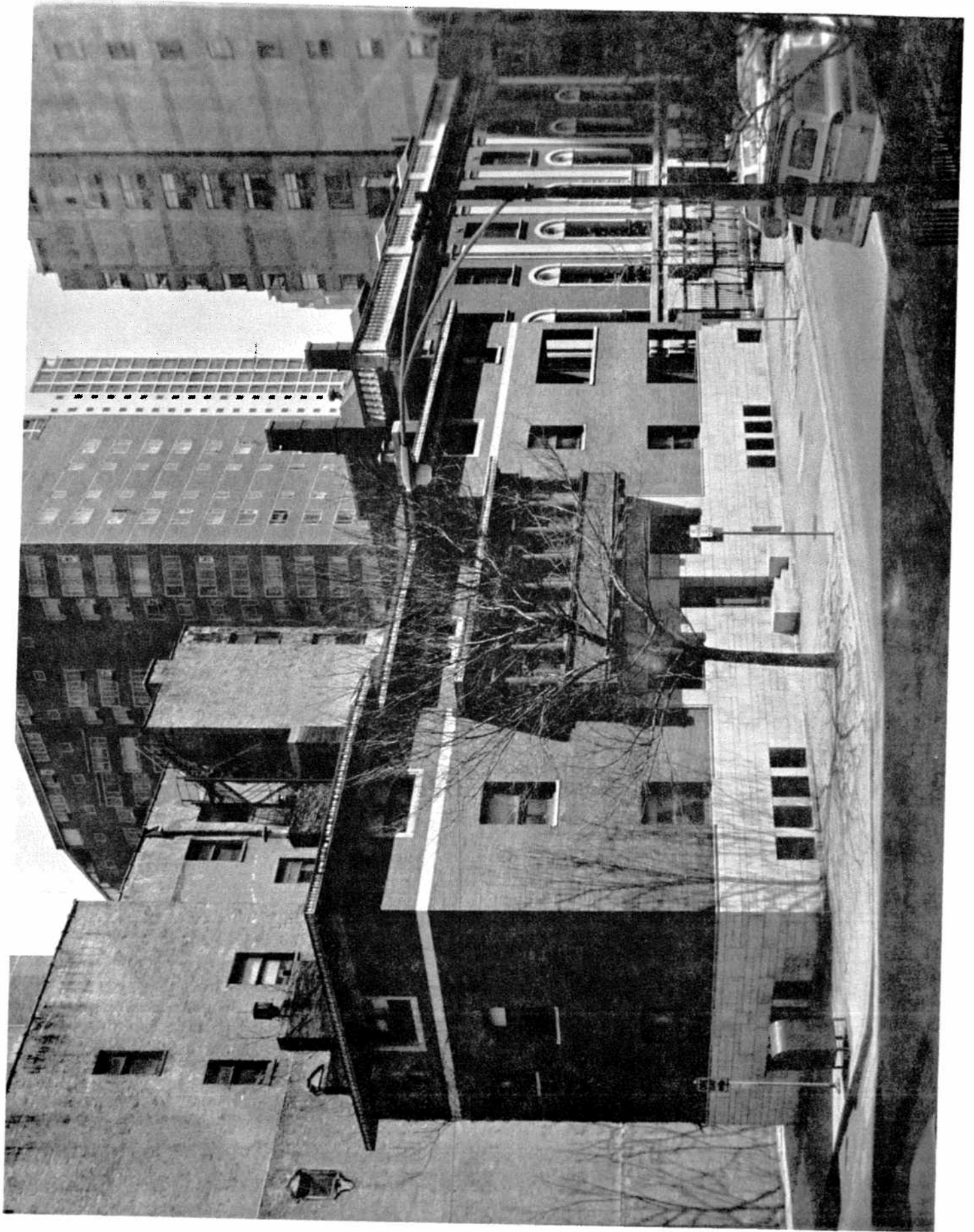


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